

# **Learner Re-Engagement in Higher Education at the Cultural Interface: An Autoethnography of an Indigenous Female Mature-Age Learner**

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## **CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY**

I, Tauri Rachelle D'Eatough, declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of International Studies and Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Production Note:

Signature: Signature removed prior to publication.

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**IN MEMORY  
OF MY PARENTS**

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**Tauri D'Eatough representing Australia at the  
Rip Curl Tavarua Oceania Surfing Cup, Tavarua, Fiji (1999)**

**From a Portable Paradise**  
**by Roger Robinson (Peepal Tree, 2019)**

And if I speak of Paradise,  
then I'm speaking of my grandmother  
who told me to carry it always  
on my person, concealed, so  
no one would know but me.  
That way they can't steal it, she'd say.  
And if life puts you under pressure,  
trace its ridges in your pocket,  
smell its piney scent on your handkerchief,  
hum its anthem under your breath.  
And if your stresses are sustained and daily,  
get yourself to an empty room – be it hotel,  
hostel or hovel – find a lamp  
and empty your paradise onto a desk;  
your white sands, green hills and fresh fish.  
Shine the lamp on it like the fresh hope  
Of morning, and keep staring at it till you sleep.

## STATEMENT INDICATING THE FORMAT OF THE THESIS

This is a conventional thesis.

## LIST OF PAPERS/PUBLICATIONS

D'Eatough, T. 2002, 'A day in the life of an Aboriginal Legal Service lawyer', *Indigenous Law Bulletin*, vol. 5, no. 16, pp. 17.

D'Eatough, T. 2003, 'Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities (The Gordon Inquiry) Western Australia – 2002', *Developing Practice: The Child, Youth and Family Work Journal*, pp.50-52.

D'Eatough, T., (2020) *Applying critical incident analysis to processes of reengagement in formal learning*. Paper presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> IAOFR International Conference on Education, 20-12 January 2020, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA (Peer-reviewed abstract).



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## **ABSTRACT**

Over the past thirty years or so in Australia, Government policy has focused on providing resources to support the enrolment of Indigenous people in higher education institutions. Whilst enrolments have grown, completion rates have disproportionately reduced. Indigenous students enrolled in higher education are more likely to be both female and mature-age students, compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts, yet there is presently scant research into the lived learning experiences of Indigenous female mature-age higher education students.

The goal of this critical-autoethnographic single-case study is to examine the nature of re-engagement in learning at a higher education level from my perspective as an Aboriginal female mature-age student. It is a personal story containing representations of the discourses and practices arising from patterns of disengagement and re-engagement with learning over the course of my life. This research study uses the Indigenous methodology of the Cultural Interface (Nakata, 2007), and the Critical Incident Technique (Tripp, 2012), as mechanisms to analyse, evaluate, and explore the experiences and challenges offered by this autoethnographic study.

Findings from this research suggest that an Indigenous methodology such as the Cultural Interface can offer three critical access points to learning for Indigenous female mature-age students. First, the Cultural Interface can enable engagement from a nuanced position with the competing and diverse ontologies and epistemologies they will encounter in higher education settings. Second, it has the potential to facilitate their agency in constructing an Indigenous standpoint from which they can contest a variety of positionings that implicate the hidden curriculum in the social production of knowledge domains. Last, it is at the Cultural Interface that Indigenous female mature-age students may develop the relational aspect between themselves and their learning environments, which is foundational for mediating and strengthening re-engagement in higher educational learning, and negotiating a validated learner identity.